

“The Smell of Truth”
Based on Ephesians 4:25-5:2
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Poverty stinks. It really does. I don't just mean that metaphorically. I mean, poor people really smell. They stink, they smell bad, they are odiferous. And poor neighborhoods stink. They smell of burning garbage, unwashed dogs and children, raw sewage flowing through gutters. These are not judgments on poor people and where they live, but simply a fact of their lives and situations. Wealthier people tend to have the luxury of enough time and disposable income to sanitize themselves and their surroundings of almost any unpleasant odor. The less odiferous and those aspiring to be less odiferous certainly have no shortage of cleaning products to choose from, although the irony is that, at least here, they are simply exchanging one odor for another, as there are virtually no fragrance free cleaning or personal care products here in Costa Rica. The notion that something must smell clean to be clean is a powerful one and sometimes the cure is worse than the illness. An addiction to bleach is a hard thing for a planet to swallow.

Be that as it may, people and their neighborhoods do not only smell of things tangible, and that is what I want to talk about tonight. You've probably heard the expression “the smell of fear” used to describe, for example, the idea that dogs are more likely to attack you if they sense you are afraid of them or used in the movies when the bad guy decides it is time to go in for the kill. Although it is biologically

dubious that we secrete something in a state of fear that dogs or criminals can actually smell, we use this combination of words to apply sensory terms to emotional states. Yes, the hair on the backs of our necks may stand up when we get the creeps, but that is not what that saying refers to. It more refers to that sixth sense which we use to read a situation emotionally or perceptually on the basis of group dynamics, or something like that. Perhaps ironically, if we *can* “smell fear,” it is because we have used our non-olfactory senses to discern that those in our midst are fearful. They may huddle together and whisper. They may tremble. They may do irrational or unexpected things. There are signs and clues around us that tell us something about the present moment and its emotional content.

It may well have been that the author of the book of Ephesians sensed from afar the smell of fear among those to whom the letter is written, fear that their newfound faith might falter in the context of their being surrounded by the very same folks who not long before were, as they are described earlier in chapter 4, “darkened in their understanding, alienated from the life of God because of their ignorance and hardness of heart.” What’s more, we are told, “They have lost all sensitivity and have abandoned themselves to licentiousness, greedy to practice every kind of impurity.” Perhaps the fear was Paul’s that the church he helped establish might not survive, but perhaps too these early followers sensed just how easy it is to fall back into old habits, and succumb to societal pressures that result in behaviors that are at odds with the way of living they had learned that Christ had

taught those who believed in him. And so this section of Ephesians offers a reminder list of virtues and vices, do's and don'ts of the Christian life that provide evidence that your faith has stuck, that you are indeed a person transformed without as well as within. Tell the truth, don't let your anger overwhelm you, don't steal, keep your language clean, and basically be nice to one another. This helpful list is followed by the poetic conclusion to this section which bears repeating: "Therefore, be imitators of God, as beloved children, and live in love, as Christ loved us and gave himself up for us, a fragrant offering and sacrifice to God."

You will remember that this letter is addressed to those who were Gentiles, that group of people who were anyone not of the original chosen people. This would have been Romans, Egyptians, Persians, anyone not born under the covenant God made with those who came from Israel. Armed with this information, you might find it odd that the Jewish sacrificial system would be referenced in a letter to Gentiles who were being courted to practice Judaism as a pre-requisite to being Christians, a practice Paul abhorred. These Gentiles would have been familiar with lists of virtues and vices like this one. These were pretty standard fare in the various religions and philosophies of the time. But even though the kind of sacrifices that Paul knew as a Jew would have been strange to them, it is likely that they would have been familiar with these practices from afar, or because their own former religions practiced something similar.

In either case, and especially the Jewish case, sacrifices were made on occasions of expressing gratitude, effecting reconciliation with those one had wronged, or asking for forgiveness and seeking atonement with God. Many of these rites involved burning the sacrificed article, often an animal, and the idea was that the smell rising up to the heavens would be pleasing to God, and provide evidence that you had done the required act and could be assured of the appropriate divine response. This should not seem like such a far-fetched idea since we generally find the smell of roasting animal flesh to be quite pleasing; just think back to your last backyard BBQ. Hey, if *we* can be pleased by a steak on the grill, why can't God? And so, what is Paul getting at here bringing in this burnt offering stuff?

I think the answer is related to Paul's understanding of our response to God's grace, that the needs we have for expressing gratitude, effecting reconciliation, and asking for forgiveness and seeking atonement from God may be met through the way we live our lives in the world, how we behave, how we conduct ourselves ethically and morally. I think Paul is trying to make a link between the behaviors in his list of virtues and the enduring work of Jesus Christ which, like those offerings of old, was pleasing to God. What Paul wants to make clear is that when we behave as he commands, we are loving one another in the same way that Christ loved us and that this is as pleasing to God as any sacrifice. In essence, as we love one another, we are participating in the redeeming death of

Christ, or at least reenacting it, and in some small way, we are saving the world, or at least bringing some light into it. If that sounds pretty lofty, saving the world and all, just by being nice to other people at church, it is, but it's true. Here's how.

I think that even though Paul writes in a way that seems to suggest that this kind of ethical behavior is supposed to be practiced between believers, he is not unaware of the ramifications this behavior will have outside the community of faith as it is currently composed. He does seem kind of exclusivistic when we says "speak the truth for we are members of one another" and "be kind to one another" because these "one anothers" aren't generic. These "one anothers" are your brothers and sisters in Christ, the members of your community of believers, not the public at large, not the neighbor next door. There is a sense in which Paul is looking for some proof, some evidence that they really are a changed people and that if they can't behave ethically around those who are already believers, they are a lost cause. Perhaps because they are young in the faith, he doesn't want to give them more than they can handle; it is, after all, easier to be good around those who are already good. Perhaps.

Or perhaps he directs this advice within the community because he knows that familiarity breeds contempt, that we may be more apt to let something slide with someone we know and trust, with someone with whom we have a relationship with a lot at stake, because we are more apt to speak evil when we need to preserve an important relationship with the keeping of a shared secret in an "I won't tell if

you won't tell" kind of way, because our friends and relations can be more easily manipulated because they love us and need us, because it is always easier to hurt the ones you love.

In either case, I wonder if Paul isn't just laying some excellent groundwork for the time when they will bring the message to those who have yet to hear the call to lead ethical lives based on the teachings of Jesus Christ, the call to renew the spirits of their minds, the call to eat of the bread of life. Perhaps we are practice for one another, practice to present the best possible witness to those who might be watching and looking for signs of hope. How often have we heard the all too legitimate criticism of our own hypocrisy and sin practiced amongst ourselves inside our own walls used as an excuse to keep as far away from church as possible. Yes, the church is appropriately filled with hypocrites in need of transformation, but what witness do we present to the world when we can't even treat our own like Christ treated his own?

Smell can travel a long way. I was surprised last week that nobody commented on my mentioning the stinky dead cat left in a bag on our tree lawn. *That* is a smell that travels. It traveled up and down the street and puzzled people for hours until we all figured it out. It was a smell that brought neighbors together and stopped work and play alike. The smell of fear is like that too. Fear is a smell that travels. It is a smell which breeds more fear. It creates mobs that lynch people. It fuels whole sectors of economies, when home security concerns consume

disproportionate amounts of family income and time, and national security concerns consume the budgets for education, welfare, arts and culture. It is responsible for the poverty which creates yet another set of unpleasant odors we'd all rather live without. Yes, the smell of fear travels a long way and fills the nostrils of every man, woman, and child on the planet.

But lest we despair that it is the only smell which can waft through our neighborhoods and lives, let us remember that with God all things are possible, that the smell of truth is more pleasingly fragrant than the smell of fear and can travel a lot further. And what is the smell of truth? My friends, the smell of truth floats through the air whenever others are changed or encouraged for the good through what we do, or whenever they experience the grace of God through what we do. If we go back and look at what Paul enjoins his siblings in the faith to do, most of his advice is given with a purpose attached. "Do not let the sun go down on your anger and do not make room for the devil," meaning that by going to bed resolved, you prevent any ongoing kind of mischief or evil. Work "so as to have something to share with the needy." Avoid speaking evil "so that your words may give grace to those who hear." Each of these has a purpose that builds up self or others, that encourages others or shares grace. Paul begins this section by saying "let us speak the truth to our neighbors," and I think the rest is derivative of this. When we are honest and sincere, when we encourage and admonish, when we do not let our fear get in the way of speaking the truth to power, we are speaking the truth, God's

truth, and we don't have time for bitterness and wrath and anger and wrangling and slander and malice. We don't have time to be idle, we don't have time to grieve the Holy Spirit. We don't have time to do anything but create the smell of truth that the Holy Spirit will blow across every land, driving out the smell of fear and every other foul odor that keeps people isolated and alone, warring and violent, or poor and hopeless.

I said last week that the local bakery is something like the bread of life, a reminder and foretaste of God's grace, an glimpse of the community God wants us to experience now and for all eternity. In our neighborhood, the smell of baking bread carries a long way, and it stimulates in me an almost immediate craving to eat. More than that, though, it is also a smell of truth. It tells me that people are working hard, that there is a place for them to meet, and money enough to afford something to eat. But let me suggest that the church is also in the bread business, offering the true bread of life, and that we are called to extend the pleasing odor of that free gift throughout our neighborhoods, and beyond, until the smell of truth creates a hunger for Jesus Christ that brings each one to the Lord's table hungry to eat the glorious feast of the Lord of life, who loved us and called us to love others.

Amen.